RISE AND FOLLOW
October 9, 2011

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 107:1-9
Exodus 3:1-12
Matthew 4:18-22

"Immediately they left their nets and followed him."
Matthew 4:20 (NRSV)

BULLETIN QUOTE (sorry, Ann, I do not have it and do not have a bulletin)

Startle us, O God, with this gift of a day: with warm sun and blue sky. In the middle of all the lively energy and busyness of this city and our lives, startle us with your truth, revealed in Jesus Christ, your son and our Lord. And when he summons us to live for him, give us faith and courage to do it. Amen

A remarkable American died last Wednesday: an innovator so visionary and creative that he literally changed the ways human beings, around the globe, think and act. Steve Jobs lived an extraordinary life: college dropout who literally "took the road not taken," technological genius who simply refused not to listen to his heart and follow his dreams. An important part of his story is personal: his diagnosis with pancreatic cancer and a virtual death sentence, successful surgery that gave him his life back until last week.

In the middle of that he did some serious thinking about more than computer technology. In a now famous Commencement Address at Stanford he explained how he dropped out of college after six months, hung around sleeping on friends' floors, eating at the Hari Krishna Temple and learning calligraphy – which he later used to create the beautiful typography on the Macintosh computer.

He said that getting fired from Apple, the company he founded, and later returned to, to lead to its extraordinary success . . . getting fired was the best thing that ever happened to him – that "sometimes life hits you over the head with a brick… and that remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – all these things just fell away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important."

Steve Jobs' dying and his wisdom about living with purpose, "living every day of your life as if it were the last one," he put it, prompts a lot of us, I assume, to think about what we are doing and how we are living, and raises the perennial question we all ask, in one way or another: "What am I going to do when I grow up?" A question asked regardless of where you are on the age spectrum, even – and particularly, I am discovering, as retirement approaches and you no longer will be doing what you've been doing most of your life. And, of course, the religious/theological dimension: does God have anything to do with it at all? As Christians, we believe that God does have everything in the world to do with this matter, in fact, it is a central Christian doctrine, but first let's think about two vocation stories in the Bible.

The first happens way back on the very edge of recorded history. A young Semite by the name of Moses is watching a flock of sheep for his father-in-law. He's actually on the lam, having killed an Egyptian soldier who was abusing one of his people, an Israelite slave. That is a whole other story. Now Moses is watching the sheep when he sees a burning bush – comes close to investigate. A voice calls his name out of the burning bush . . . "Moses." "Who are you?" he asks. The voice says, "I Am Who I Am": that is "I am unique among the gods. I am the source of everything that is, the source of all life, the Ground of Being." So far, so good. We're learning a little theology here – Ontological Theology, to put a fine point on it. Then the voice says something absolutely stunning and not very philosophical. "I have observed the misery of my people – I have heard them cry – I have come to deliver them." That's amazing, unheard of. The one, eternal God, the mysterious Ground of Being has a heart, is compassionate and is going to do something magnificent. God is going to deliver Moses' people, liberate them from their miserable captivity. Moses is delighted with the great news.

Then comes the rub: "I will send you to Pharaoh to get the job done."

Moses is taken aback. This is not what he wanted to hear. He's not looking for a job. He's settled down with a new wife and employment as a shepherd, and quite happy: he's secure and safe. So he tries to negotiate. It is one of my favorite sequences in the Bible. He tries four times to get out of this new, daunting responsibility: he uses words that sound very familiar because I have used them, and my guess is so have you.

"Who am I that I should go?" "Why me?" God answers, "I will be with you," which isn't an answer to the question.

"All right. Suppose I go: what if they don't believe me?" When that doesn't work, he tries again.

“You know, I’m a terrible public speaker. I stutter and stumble. I’m not up to this.”

Finally, pulling out all the stops, pleading, “O Lord, please send someone else.”

Before every major responsibility that has come to me, I have had that conversation, or something very much like it, with God – or whoever was asking me to do something I did not think I was capable of doing.

> “Why me?”
> “What if I fail?”
> “I’m not up to this.”
> “Please, find someone else.”

God really wants Moses. Out of all the other alternatives, has chosen Moses. So Moses goes back to Egypt, talks to Pharaoh, the people are ultimately set free, and the rest is history.

I was thrilled beyond words in 1985 to receive the invitation to come to be the pastor of this church. But the truth is, the warm July night before the moving van arrived, we sat on the front steps of the home we loved and where our children had grown up, and where we had entertained wonderful friends, the home from which I left every morning for a job I loved – and we did ask “Why are we doing this? We’re not sure we <u>can</u> do this. Whose idea was this anyhow?”

The second vocation story is about Jesus. He’s thirty years old, living in his childhood home in Nazareth where he has assumed responsibility for his father’s carpentry business. He is secure, has a job, a roof over his head, his mother and brothers and sisters to support, and he has friends. After an experience at the Jordan River with his cousin John – who baptizes him, and a time alone in the wilderness, Jesus walks away from it all and begins to teach in the Synagogues, and heal. Near the beginning of the story, he’s walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, sees two brothers fishing, Peter and Andrew, says “Follow me,” and they did just that, dropped their nets and followed. It happens again, James and John, in a fishing boat with their father, Zebedee. “Follow me.” And they drop their nets and follow.

People who think about this simple, direct and dramatic exchange, and every New Testament scholar worth his or her salt has, usually wonders whether there is more to this story. Maybe it wasn’t quite that abrupt. Maybe the four of them knew Jesus, had heard him speaking in the Synagogue, were fascinated by his ideas. Maybe the four of them had talked about how boring fishing all day, every day was, how nothing different or exciting ever happened. Maybe the four of them sat around at

night sharing a wine skin or two, complaining about their lives, talking about walking away from it all, out on their own. Possible, I suppose. All the Bible says is that Jesus said "Follow me," and they got up from where they were sitting and followed.

At its most elemental and basic, it is what Christianity is, Christian religion, Christian faith – following Jesus. It is not what many of us were taught and thought, or think. It is not a codified set of beliefs. It is not figuring out your personal theology, considering a number of alternative philosophies and choosing the one you like the best. It is not subscribing to a list of essential tenets. All of that has its place, of course. We Presbyterians have specialized in thinking about religion. We hold dear the commandment to love God with our minds as well as our hearts. We have founded schools and colleges and theological seminaries wherever we went, originally so people could read the Bible on their own and think about what they believed. We require clergy to spend a lot time in the classroom, reading and writing and learning other languages, and taking exams. We talk about doctrine. We argue about ideas a lot. Sometimes we have even fought over doctrine. And with distressing frequency, we get so worked up we resolve our doctrinal disagreements by walking away from one another, split up, start a new Presbyterian denomination. There are literally hundreds of them and there is a possibility that we will see another new one in the near future . . . as Presbyterian brothers and sisters (in this case, mostly brothers) so unhappy over our recent decision to ordain faithful Presbyterians, qualified and gifted and called by God – who just happen to be gay or lesbian, and also unhappy about matters of doctrine and biblical interpretation, are meeting to decide whether or not they can live with the rest of us.

As I thought about this and joined an effort to persuade them not to leave, I thought about something Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote years ago, "The real trouble is that the pure word of Jesus has been overlaid with so much human ballast – burdensome rules and regulations . . . that it has become extremely difficult to make a decision for Christ" (*The Cost of Discipleship* p.29).

It sounds exactly like what is happening in the mainline churches, and to be honest, within Roman Catholicism as well. More and more data indicates that churches are losing members, not because people disagree with this or that policy, or public statement or rule, or belief, but because fewer young people are joining: leaving church at 18 or so – as has always happened, but not coming back. And the reason, the data indicates, is that they are simply not interested in a Christianity of rules and restrictions – particularly about sex – not interested in Christianity as a creed or set of theological propositions, no matter how elegant. They just don't find what they see of Christian religion in the media very compelling or interesting and they find

unappealing, a turn off, Christians arguing with one another, judging, excommunicating one another, preachers telling people who to vote for on the basis of their own opinion of what it means to be a Christian. That is turning people off, whether it comes from the right or the left (see Robert Putnam and Charles Campbell, *American Grace*).

I first read that Dietrich Bonhoeffer sentence, about the word of Jesus so overlaid with so much human ballast that it is actually difficult to be a Christian, at a critical time in my own life.

If truth were told, (and why not?) I came to Divinity School not because I knew in my heart that I wanted to be a Presbyterian minister, far from it. I had invested a fair amount of energy avoiding it. I decided to study theology for a few years because I wanted to figure out what I believed about God, and the meaning of life and death, and Jesus. I was directed to one of the best places in the world to do that, a graduate school of religion that didn't care much, at least not then, about what you did with the theological education they gave you. In the back of my mind I had a vague notion of teaching, maybe at a college, as Dean Winters did. Richard Winters, Dean of Students, where I went to college: a central casting College Dean, tweed jacket, elbow patches, pipe, kind, greeting students on campus and at football games – and he, the word was, was a minister. But I was in Divinity School to pursue truth and figure things out. And then two things happened to me. I went to the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago – and they needed a Senior High Sunday School teacher and youth director so I signed up. The congregation was nicely mixed racially, but the high school students were all African American. They taught me about what it was like to be black in American culture. They taught me about racism and how they were looking to the church and to what they understood of Christian faith to make some kind of difference, to speak a word of hope, to show courage enough to stand with them and to do something about injustice, and the deeply entrenched prejudice they encountered every day of their young lives.

That was first. The second thing was that I discovered Dietrich Bonhoeffer: everybody was reading and talking about his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and scholar, and a rising scholarly theologian: born into privilege, he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1933, just as the Nazis were coming to power in Germany. He was a critic of Hitler's national socialism from the outset, and a critic of the German Church that easily accommodated and cooperated with Nazism. As critics of the regime, among them clergy, began to be arrested, tried for treason and executed, Bonhoeffer came to America, to Union Seminary in New York City, to study and teach. But in 1939 he returned to Germany to share the suffering of his people. He eventually joined the Resistance, participated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. The plot failed, the conspirators were rounded

up and arrested. Bonhoeffer was in prison for two years. His *Letters and Papers from Prison*, published posthumously, have become a modern Christian classic. On April 9, 1945 he was executed – a few days before the war ended.

Words he wrote in 1933 became even more powerful in light of his martyrdom. "When Christ calls a man," Bonhoeffer wrote, "he bids him come and die."

It was from Bonhoeffer that I finally learned the most important lesson of all: that being a Christian is not about having it all figured out intellectually, it's not about a private, emotional experience. All of that may be part of it, but being a Christian is finally about getting up and following Jesus.

Bonhoeffer wrote about the encounter with Peter and Andrew, James and John along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. "The call goes forth . . . The response of the disciples is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p.48).

"Follow Me – run along behind me…" "Faith," Bonhoeffer wrote, "can no longer mean sitting and waiting… they must rise and follow" (p.49,50,53).

Now, not everybody can or should walk away from family and responsibility, let go of all obligations and duties – to follow Jesus. Not everybody should become a minister. God forbid. But everybody is invited to rise up and follow. It might mean something different for every one of us. For one, it means being a minister. For another, a doctor, or a nurse. For another, a lawyer, an honest and faithful broker, a good truck driver or kind waitress, a devoted parent, a loving spouse . . . God doesn't want a world full of clergy. God wants men and women who follow Jesus by living lives of kindness and compassion and justice, and generosity: men and women who live thoroughly in this world – as Christians, followers of Jesus.

It is about living for some great purpose and I believe God has everything in the world to do with that. I believe Christ calls us through what we love and care most about, what we are most passionate about.

You become an authentic person, a fully alive human being, the psychologists know, on the basis of your choices, your values and commitments. That's what's at stake when Jesus says "Follow me" and someone rises up and follows.

Steve Jobs didn't claim to be a Christian but he did understand the issue when in his Stanford commencement speech he said:

"Your time is limited, so don't waste it . . . Don't be trapped by dogma. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your inner voice. Most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary."

You and I answer the call not once, but every day of our lives, in decisions large and small, in the way we choose to live, in the commitments we make, in the love we give . . . the life we give. I try to read "The Summer Day" every now and then as a reminder. It's a poem by Mary Oliver. Here are a few lines:

> "Who made the world?
> Who made the swan, and the black bear?
> Who made the grasshopper…?
>
> " . . . I don't know exactly what a prayer is,
> I do know how to pay attention,
> how to fall down into the grass,
> how to kneel down in the grass…
>
> "Tell me, what else should I have done?
> Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
> Tell me, what is it you plan to do
> with your one wild and precious life?"

"Rise up and Follow me," Jesus said.

Amen